

P. Roberts, Chalmers
P. Oberdorfer, Sen. Don
P. Kalb, Marvin
P. Abel, Elie
Johnson, Lyndon B.
Rusk, Dean

Rusk Is Hero in LBJ Account

By Chalmers M. Roberts

The excerpts from former President Johnson's memoirs presented here yesterday and today are the high point of his Vietnam account. The outline long has been known; many of the details, especially about Secretary of State Dean Rusk, are new.

Here we have what the Pentagon Papers did not have or had only in part: the intimate thinking of Rusk, Clifford, McNamara, Fortas, McGeorge Bundy, Rostow, Bunker, Westmoreland and Wheeler. The long-time role of Gen. Wheeler, incidentally, as we now know it though more from other sources than from Mr. Johnson's account is worthy of a full-fledged historical examination.

In many ways, as Mr. Johnson tells his story, the President seems a man making Solomon-like judgments among the competing proposals of his advisers. We hear his reaction, we are given some of his quotations but there is precious little to indicate that he himself introduced new ideas, new proposals. It appears, rather, that he picked and chose from what was put before him.

Yesterday's installment

shows that Mr. Johnson sensed that something was coming—the Communists' Tet offensive of 1968—but what is missing is the sense of disbelief of the evidence so clearly spelled out in Don Oberdorfer's new book, "Tet!" The most Mr. Johnson can bring himself to do is to concede that it was a "shock" and to berate the "emotional and exaggerated reporting."

In today's installment Mr. Johnson goes to great length to expose as a fallacy the idea so prevalent just after his March 31, 1968, speech that there had been what soon thereafter was described as a massive "struggle for the mind of the President." He also goes into detail to deride The New York Times story about the discussion on sending another 206,000 men to Vietnam, seeing in it all sorts of mean motives.

Dean Rusk is obviously Lyndon Johnson's hero. He documents the fact that Rusk on Feb. 27 proposed the limited bombing halt he announced on March 31. There are no direct barbs at Clifford but plenty of quotes from the defense secretary to show that it was very late in the game before he turned from hawk to dove.

What we have in this ac-

count of 1967-68, especially in today's excerpts, is a presidential overview. A great deal of pertinent detail, for those who will have to put it together in some calmer time as history, is in the Pentagon papers, in the Oberdorfer book and, especially as to Wheeler's role, in "Roots of Involvement" by Marvin Kalb and Elie Abel. None can stand alone for a total history; to weave them together will be a monumental task.

The Wise Men, that collection of senior advisers out of office, figure heavily in most accounts of how the March 31 decision came about. But the former President, though his account of what transpires is along familiar lines and has been omitted from the excerpts, sloughs off their advice as having been too much influenced by "the general mood of depression and frustration" in the wake of Tet and as not squaring with "situation as I understood it."

Here, probably, is the key. The "situation" to the President centered on the hard military facts. To so many others it had a high content of the new mood at home and in both Vietnams, North and South.

Looking back from today's

vantage point, the March 31 decision was the great turning point of the war, a turn forced by the Communist assault at Tet whatever the cost was to the enemy. It meant both a lid clamped on the flow of troops to Vietnam and a partial bombing halt that led by fall to a total bombing halt. It meant, as well, the beginning of the talks in Paris.

But there is no sense of this in Mr. Johnson's account. Nowhere does he concede defeat of his past policies. Nowhere does he say that March 31 turned the war around in such a way that the new President the next year would be in a position to begin a long-range de-escalation and withdrawal. Mr. Johnson might well take credit for setting the scene for President Nixon. But that evidently is not the way he then viewed it.

The most he allows himself is the thought, in conclusion, that "the enemy had failed in Vietnam; would Hanoi succeed in the United States?" And as a last desperate effort, it seems in retrospect, to prevent that he took himself out of contention for another term in the White House.

Sec. 4.01.1 New York Times
Sec. 4.01.2 - Tet!

- The Vantage Point
- Roots of Involvement